THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

Painful Truth / Necessary Forgiveness

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John M. Buchanan

For five hundred years prophets of both despair and hope foresaw a coming secular age, yet the majority of Americans found reasons to convince themselves that they were a religious people "under God." Their long pilgrimage may end one day. But it is more likely that the people's passion to make sense of things and to find company with others who share their visions will prevail into indefinite tomorrows. Citizens will no doubt continue to express their hunger for wholeness in a fragmented society, will look for simplicity in an ever more complex world, will find appropriate paths for their sojourn in a world of mazes unless and until, one day, America itself no longer exists and its pilgrims disappear. But if the actors remain, and remain somehow free, their dreams will prod them on to more restless pilgrimages.

Martin E. Marty
Pilgrims in Their Own Land:
500 Years of Religion in America

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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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SEPTEMBER 13, 1998
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
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PAINFUL TRUTH: NECESSARY FORGIVENESS

A Psalm of David

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff - they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.
Psalm 23 (NRSV)

Martin Marty, distinguished historian and student of American religious history, understands more than anyone the reality of our nation's religious character and unique religious experience. At the end of one of his books, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, he reminds us that for five hundred years we Americans have found reasons to convince ourselves that we are a religious people and a nation under God. And, Marty predicts, so long as there is are American people who are free, our dreams (and our hopes and aspirations, our sense of what is right and wrong, what is good and what is evil) "will prod us on to more restless pilgrimages." (p. 476-7)

That national spirit, or soul, was there from the beginning. Pilgrims saw themselves as a "city set on a hill," a new covenant community called by God to a special destiny.

The patriots who declared independence and the politicians who crafted a constitution invoked sacred honor and divine providence.

Our hopes and dreams, our sense of right and wrong and good and evil led us to fight a civil war under a President who was so haunted by the notion of God's presence in the midst of the conflict and God's intent for people to somehow live in peace and justice that Quaker philosopher Elton Trueblood called him, "Abraham Lincoln, Theologian of American Anguish."

Those hopes and dreams energized a great social revolution called Civil Rights and they inspired young Americans to make the ultimate sacrifice in the struggle against Fascist totalitarianism and racial genocide, as we have been so powerfully reminded this summer by Stephen Spielberg in *Saving Private Ryan.*

And, now, those dreams and hopes, that sense of right and wrong, that awareness of the presence of God in all of life and of a national accountability and responsibility to God has brought us to a painful moment, perhaps a defining moment, a dangerous moment altogether unique in American history. As I thought all summer about this Sunday, about the fact that we would be singing and hearing American religious music and thinking about the particularly American theological motifs that music represents, at a time when the nation was moving slowly but inexorably toward a crisis in regard to the President and the report of the Independent Counsel, I knew in my heart that, much as I wanted to, I could not ignore the moment. I did not know when I prepared this sermon that this would be the week the report would be delivered to Congress and available on the internet on Friday.

I do not want to preach this sermon. My guess is that most of you do not want me to preach it. But, I do not know how we can stand in the five-hundred-year stream of American religion, particularly the Presbyterian branch, which has always insisted that religion is public as well as private, political as well as internal . . . . I don't know how we cannot have a conversation about it, here—in church—on Sunday morning.

We are not without resources, by the way.

We have two resources, actually—a story and a belief which we stand up and affirm in one voice every time we are together. The belief is in the forgiveness of sin, and the story is about David.

As the whole matter began to unfold, I found myself thinking a lot about David. I had seen his amazing statue by Michelangelo in Florence earlier this year, an astonishing expression of physical beauty, strength, and presence that celebrates Israel's own love for its greatest king. So I looked him up and read his story again, several times actually, and I commend it to you. It's a lot better than most airport novels or television soap operas. You can find it in the Old Testament, in the Hebrew scriptures, 2 Samuel 9—through the end of the book and into the first two chapters of the next one, 1 Kings. I also ordered and read a very good book about the story, *David's Truth*, by Walter Brueggemann.

You know the story. David is the king, a national hero, beloved, adored, protégé of King Saul, friend of the King's son, Jonathan, slayer of Goliath, poet and musician, who either wrote or commissioned many of the Psalms, military leader, smart politician.

David sees beautiful Bathsheba bathing on the roof of her house, is stirred by her beauty, sends for her, engages in sexual intercourse with her, and sends her home. Not long after, Bathsheba sends word to the king, two words actually, "I'm pregnant."

The problem with this dilemma is that Bathsheba is married. So is David, for that matter, but at the time that was not as importantly morally or legally as the fact of Bathsheba's marriage. Uriah is her husband; a good, loyal military officer in David's army, at the moment carrying out his duty to king and nation.

David, in the best tradition of politics from the White House to the royal palace in Jerusalem, devises a plan for damage control. It is, essentially, to disguise the truth. Uriah is summoned from the front and sent home to sleep with his wife. But Uriah, dutiful servant of the King, declines and sleeps instead at the King's door. David needs more

creative damage control. He offers Uriah a few drinks, hoping that alcohol will inspire him to spend the night with Bathsheba. Again, Uriah refuses, and now, Israel's bright and shining star does the unthinkable: sends Uriah back to battle, carrying in his own hand his death warrant in the form of orders to his commanding officer to place him at the front in the thick of the worst fighting and then to pull back so that Uriah will be killed.

Brueggemann asks, "Is there nothing to which David will not stoop for the cover up? Is there no shame? We know as much as we can stomach about David . . . about the public use of power for personal ends . . .." (p. 60-61)

Enter God in the person and voice of the prophet, Nathan, who tells David a dreadful story about a powerful man who steals a poor man's sheep, and in four words that match Bathsheba's two in power, looks David in the eye and says, "You are the man."

David is caught. The truth somehow is out. Now David repents. David's remorse is powerful and personally painful. It comes only when there is no other alternative, only when his back is against the wall. Contemporary news analysts would probably characterize it as cynical and insincere, because David didn't level immediately and engaged in weeks and months of spin control, outright lies, and even murder. But the Bible portrays it without cynicism. David's remorse—late as it is—is genuine.

Read it: Psalm 51, the subtitle of which reads, "A Psalm of David, when the prophet Nathan came to him, after he had gone in to Bathsheba."

> "Have mercy on me O God,
> according to your steadfast love . . .
> . . . cleanse me from my sin.
>
> For I know my transgressions,
> and my sin is ever before me.
> Against you, you alone have I sinned."

David doesn't resign. He is not impeached. He is held accountable for his behavior, confesses, asks pardon—and is forgiven and restored and renewed. Nothing will ever be the same. That is part of his punishment. His sin, as he wrote (in Psalm 51) "is ever before me." He will never live another day of his life without the memory of his sin and shame. Israel now knows more about its king than it wants to know: his humanness, his stupidity, his selfishness, his sin. This is not without repercussion. This is not cheap grace. The child born of his liaison with Bathsheba will die, and David will be devastated.

But God's love for David creates a new being, a new situation, a new being; and David, flawed, human, sinner, will continue to lead the nation and will continue to know the amazing grace of God, who will not let him go; the God who will be with him even in the valley of the shadow of death.

That's the story, and it is close to the heart of our religious tradition, which means close to the heart of how we understand ourselves and others and our life together.

The belief that we affirm weekly in the Apostles' Creed is the forgiveness of sins. We believe in forgiveness. It's not just a theory or therapeutic technique. We believe in forgiveness as we believe in God and Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. We believe forgiveness is morally better than non-forgiveness. We believe Jesus Christ, God's son, God's incarnation, came for the forgiveness of sins. We believe that forgiveness is of God and that we are called to forgive as we have been forgiven. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors," we pray. We believe it, and we know, everyone of us, that it is not easy, sometimes more difficult and painful than other times, but when the offense is real forgiveness is never easy. Forgiveness is always costly. Forgiveness cost the life of God's only son.

Our leader is flawed. He has broken his promise. He has betrayed trust. His appalling private behavior has been publicly exposed and discussed arguably more than anyone else's in all of history. All his efforts at damage control have failed, and he has lied to cover up what he has done. He may even have abused the power of his office to cover up what he did. And when he had an opportunity to confess, several weeks ago, he chose to do so grudgingly, and instead lashed out at the Independent Counsel.

But now he has confessed and apologized and asked for forgiveness, and the Congress, and ultimately the American people, must deal with it. He may choose to resign. Many hope he will. Many are advising him to resign. If he does not, we have three choices. Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times*, listed them:

> Impeach him,
>
> limp along with him, watching him at every step and never allowing anyone to forget what he did, continuing this exercise in national voyeurism, so obviously delighting in the opportunity to traffic in salacious detail, the more the better;
>
> OR,
>
> we can forgive him.

It will not be a politically popular suggestion, but it is the word, the Biblical word, the faith word we have to offer. It is, I believe, the only word we have to offer, even if we don't want to offer it.

Thomas Friedman argues not from a faith perspective, but from a pragmatically political one, "It's time to forgive," he writes, "not for his sake, but for ours. Not because his affairs are unimportant, but because ours are more important: Social Security reform, education reform, child care reform, campaign finance reform, tobacco legislation, not to mention the current fiscal crisis, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Russia."

Stephen Carter, Yale Law professor and best selling author, in another editorial says, that Mr. Clinton and we have an opportunity for genuine moral rejuvenation and renewal. We know clearly what is right and wrong. We know what we expect from our President, and we have a rare opportunity to do something radical and beautiful: forgive and learn from this and then turn away from this; repent of it, him and us; and be about the business of the nation.

Frank Harrington, Pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, told a story recently that touched me. It's about a similar time, when many of us grieved the inability of a leader to say, "I'm sorry," and therefore the nation's inability to forgive.

It's about Leon Jaworski, the special prosecutor during the Watergate scandal. Mr. Jaworski was a Presbyterian elder. One Sunday, he was worshipping at New York Avenue Presbyterian Church in Washington, the church where Lincoln worshipped and where the pew in which he sat during the Civil War is reserved for presidents. On that morning, Mr. Jaworski watched as the President of the United States, Richard Nixon, walked down the aisle and was seated by an usher in the Lincoln pew. "Leon Jaworski, sitting several pews behind the President, thought about all he knew from listening to the Nixon tapes. He knew that the President could be indicted for criminal activity beyond any shadow of doubt. There he sat in worship. He wondered what would happen if the President suddenly stood up and said,

> 'Dr. Docherty, (George Docherty was the pastor) I would like a moment of special privilege,' and then turned to the congregation and said, 'I want to say today that, as President of the United States, I have sinned before God and lied to you. I have asked God's forgiveness and now ask yours. I have come to this church today to make full disclosure of who and what I am and what I have become. I promise you from this day forward I'm going to do better.'

Leon Jaworski said that if Richard Nixon had done that, we probably would have gathered the president up and put him on our shoulders and carried him back to the White House." (reprinted from "Peachtree Presbyterian Pulpit." in *Homiletics,* Sept.-Oct., 1998)

Not unlike that shepherd we sang about to begin this little festival of American hymns, who places the lost sheep on his shoulders and carries it home; not unlike that Amazing Grace with which we will end, "grace that saved a wretch like me."

We pilgrims, with our five-hundred-year history, have been reminded over and over again, not that God loves or blesses us more than any other people, but that God is present in the life of the world and in the life of our nation, that God cares deeply and personally about all people and each one of us.

It's the miracle of God's love—from which nothing can separate us: nothing in life or death, not strife or warfare, not sickness, suffering, or aging, not even our own shortcomings and our failures, our small moral lapses or even our monumental sin. Nothing can separate us from God's love

May that love bless you.

May our sense of that love as a powerful force operating in our midst lead us to be and to act responsibly, compassionately, justly, and to extend to others the grace and forgiveness that has been extended, in Jesus Christ, to us.

Amen.